Challenging Orientalism

Confronting Sexualization of Belly Dance

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Abstract: The colonial expansion, under the guidance of orientalist ideologies, employed the feminization and sexualization of "primitive cultures" as one of its legitimating tools of domination. This paper discusses how colonization necessitated the sexualization of the colonized, leaving lasting marks in the contemporary cultural portrayals-through sanitized dance forms propagated by post-colonial societies. The following work explores, through the example of belly dance, how colonial narratives reconstituted cultural practices into the pejorative, recontextualizing them within an articulation of Eurocentric modesty, propriety, and gender roles. The theoretical perspective is that Orientalism represents one of many methodologies for the objectification of culture whereby the East was the passive "Other" to the rational, active West. The colonial constructions of sex and gender maintained the patriarchal hierarchies, inscribing on a paradigm wherein the cultures of the feminized were constructed as inferior and needing Western intervention. This paper traces these patterns through the historical shifts-including that of the erasure of several of Egypt's folk dances, which were condemned and marginalized under the guise of modernization. The analysis shows how the contemporary post-colonial societies carry these imprints in the rebranding of the traditional dances into signs of national identity, sanitized from their subversive and embodied histories. This fact underlines that colonial mechanisms leave their impact on cultural articulation-skewed toward historical dehumanization, feminization, and sexualization that self-perpetuate in the contemporary art and identity narratives.

Keywords: belly dance, orientalism, colonialism, post-colonial identity, sexualization

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Theoretical Background of the Occident and Orient

The Age of Exploration (15th-17th century) marked the initiation of colonial thought in European minds. However, it had a precursor in the form of Orientalism, whose formal existence commenced in 1312, at the Church Council of Vienna with the establishment of Arabic, Greek, Hebrew and Syriac studies (Said, E. W., 1994).

Extant beyond the geographical narrative, that which is entrenched in Eurocentrism, where the Occident is to the West of Europe and the Orient, to the East, Orientalism promotes a universal practice of "designating one's mind (as) a familiar space which is *ours* and an unfamiliar space beyond *ours* which is *theirs* (Said, E. W., 1994)." This birthed the contrasting civilizations argument, that the West is rational, peaceful, liberal and logical, while the East, just the opposite. In essence, in Orientalism, the West is the "Subject" while the East, the "Object": that in the Orient's weakness lies the strength of the West, that the Orient plays an important role of being the fodder used to fuel the European seat of power.

Although the term "Orient" was predominantly used to reference countries to the East of Europe, specifically the muslim dominant nations, today, the term "Orient" in American society refers to East-Asians due to their migratory influx into the United States. It wasn't until 2009 and 2016, when New York former Governor Paterson and Former President Obama, had "Oriental" stricken from NY State and Federal Laws, respectively.

"To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact" (Said). Orientalist thoughts are deep-rooted in pre-colonial and European imperialist ideologies. Rudyard Kipling had called the British, French and Dutch efforts at colonialism and establishment of an imperial regime, a "white man's burden to bring Enlightenment to primitive nations".

"Besides, much of the pleasure derived from this imaginary penetration predicated itself upon the constructed image of the Orient as a fecund, [a] feminized space" (McClintock, 1995). Flaubert deluded himself with a gratifying satisfaction afforded by this perverse imagery of fertilization as a result of the penetration of the Orient by the European forces. Fueled by these ideologies, Lord Cromer was of the opinion that Orientals existed as human material to be governed by the British. To interrogate the colonialist tale of the civilized and the uncivilized, one needs to begin with the inspection of

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the fodder that keeps the colonial machinery ongoing: the structures of race, gender, class and sexuality.

The success of the Orientalist school of thought, in this paper, is hypothesized to stem from a rather tried and tested approach towards subjugation, transfer of power and objectification: the creation of the construct of sex and gender, trapped within its social confinements.

Sex and Gender Construct

The universal category of a Woman, and its social identity, expression, and boundaries within which it is confined, did not exist in several African cultures prior to colonial encounters. For example, in Yoruba culture, anatomical differences between bodies such as sex wasn't used as the differentiating variable (Thomas, G., 2007). In Eurocentric cultures however, the body first exists as a social body, and in it entrenched, were social hierarchies based on utility of the physical body (Oyěwùmí, O., 1997).

Beauvoir famously once wrote, "One is not born, but becomes a woman", employing a familiar narrative that predates colonial thought: the narrative of a man as the Subject (the active force), while the woman as the Object (the passive force) (Beauvoir, S. de., 1949). The power imbalance thus created, views women as secondary, subordinate, and auxiliary (Russett, C., 1991). Forming the basis of the sexist, orientalist ideologies, the long-established terrains of subjugation of women based on their utility, mistaken as an identity. Their purpose is to be exploited for the betterment of the Western society, which can be characterized by the capitalization of "sex" and "gender" as not just an attaché to one's identity, but the identity itself (Oyěwùmí, O., 1997).

In the medieval period, the existence of a woman was within the cycle of womanhood. It is clearly chalked out in Vives, "The Instruction of a Christian Woman", a treatise on female education that is divided into 3 parts: Book I "Which Treats of Unmarried Young Women", Book II "Which Treats of Married Women," and Book III "On Widows"- in essence the books were divided based on where does the woman lie on the reproductive scale: Is she a Maiden, Mother or a Crone? (Vives, J. L., et. al., 2002). Any deviations from the ideal, resulted in her being cast into one of the Witchy Archetypes: the Slut, the Lesbian or the Hag- essentially women whose utility remains unidentifiable, unsuitable and unusable by society (Purkiss, D., 1996).

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The construction of ideals around womanhood paved the way of not only understanding, but also demonizing certain cultures, objectifying their bodies, and sexualizing their art. From a colonial standpoint it was necessary to create an argument for colonization of "primitive cultures", which involved the feminization of cultures and deeming it unfit to rule and even think for itself.

Post the fall of Constantinople on May 29, 1453, the remnants of the Roman Empire, and its admirers among the European Empires, set out on a quest to colonize the East in order to maintain long-term stability of trade routes. Their economic destitution was a direct result of the growing Islamic Empires of the time, thus contributing to the foundations of Islamophobia we see today. Ever since, there has been a narrative: a narrative of the West as the Savior, the East that needs saving; a narrative where the West is the all-time powerful being fueled by the sacrifices of the East; a narrative where the Western religion is the one true God while the Eastern religion, Islam is the Devil; and finally the narrative of the West as the Active Force, Masculine and the Penetrator, and the East as the Passive Force, Feminine and the Defiled.

This dichotomy in observing the world with the lens of the East vs West Civilization Philosophy, has led to today, where the East is not only observed as sexualized, but also mythical, irrational and ungovernable. This comfort is where the assault on the existent religion, science, culture, food, linguistics, dance, music and art, begins, in order to shadow the culture with "Western" beliefs, prejudice and perceptions, so as to confine its entity into a boundary that it accepts as the new normal.

Delacroix, is famously known to have painted Algerian women of the harem. However, this painting has "evoked both desire for the harem women and repulsion at the Orient's inferior social and political systems." For centuries, MENA women have been painted and pictured without their consent, reducing their identities to mere postcards that were sent back to Europe to titillate and thus invite more Europeans to journey through the MENA.

The allure of this painting lies in the aspect that Delacroix was able to infiltrate the harem, and unveil its women so as to paint their bodies. It was indeed observed as a breach of the sanctity of Algerian society; thus, solidified the French imperial control over Algerian soil.

Throughout the 1950s, we see an emergence of the "White Knight in shining armour" analogy being used by European colonizers to mask the war crimes, torture, massacre, military interventions and genocide under

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the umbrella of "moral crusades", to dehumanize and delegitimize the Muslim existence.

Edward Said once summarized, "(the) freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery. (Said, E. W., 1994)" Thus, upon being feminized, the culture that is subjugated, penetrated, destroyed, controlled, ruled upon and rewritten, is a culture that fuels the colonial machinery of Europe.

Orientalism as a Phenomenon

Post-colonial societies bear the imprint of orientalist ideologies often masked by tradition and neo-religious social systems. Upon colonization, an increased sociocultural selection of the idealised androgynous subtype brought patriarchal notions to the forefront (Thomas, 2007).

Furthermore, having suffered from cultural upheaval, poverty, economic exploitation, malnutrition, lowered life expectancies, and social structures designed to create a sense of racial inferiority, the ethnic, religious and tribal groups adopted ideologies marketed by the colonizers as their coping mechanism (Tharoor, 2018).

Dehumanization and feminization were necessary to justify colonization (Thomas, 2007). Within a colonized society, however, restrictions put upon expression, be it gender-oriented or sexuality defined, were sought out as media to annihilate the indigenous practices the colonizers encountered (Kipling, 1940; Chisolm, 1982).

Establishments such as patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy resulted in traumatic experiences inherited by the general populace as a whole.

Diop maintains that European anthropologists had once associated African matriarchal culture with a "primitive state of promiscuous intercourse", while positioning "masculine imperialism" as grounds for patriarchal superiority (C.A. Diop, 1989). These scholars had theorized that evolution calls for a shift from a matriarchal regime to a rational, spiritual and morally developed patriarchal regime. The choreographed identities of African nations were dismantled and reimagined by borrowing orientalist depictions and colonial perceptions. Thomas had once remarked on Pan-Africanism, "[the cultural elements that were] seen as work of Black bodies which become

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biologically White as a consequence of cultural evolution, before turning Black again, evidently, with cultural degeneration" (Thomas, 2007).

Taking belly dance as an example, specifically with respect to the dancers born out of Egypt, troupes such as El Tannoura (an all male ensemble) and El-Nil Folkloric Troupe do not get featured on the Egyptian gazette (a quasi-governmental publication). However, state-sponsored invented traditions, featured in the Reda Troupe, National Folk Troupe and Alexandrian Folk Dance Troupe, get national and international viewership. Franken in referencing the National Folk Troupe had stated, "a dance troupe performing Egyptian folk dances, modelled after Eastern European troupes so popular within the Soviet bloc, seemed appropriate as an expression of patriotism and nationalism of the time" (Shay, 1996).

In an interview with Reda himself, the subject had remarked that the upper classes of Egypt express embarrassment toward their folk dances, particularly belly dance, that he was compelled to imitate western artforms: the choreography, the staging, the music, the movements and even the clothing. In fact, Reda only staged women as per the colonial gaze, as it was seen improper for a man to display belly dance movements on a platform. This sanitized version of folk dances imagined and staged on a world dance platform, is what we recognize belly dance as today.

Staging folk dances are often under the guise of constructed nationalist identities. While every other country in the world was choreographing and setting the stage with dances that would later represent the nation they belonged to, Egypt had a peculiar problem: their colloquially termed belly dances were seen as too bold, sexualized and uncouth to be staged on a world platform. In 1961, under the direction of Boris Ramazin, a former Moiseyev company dancer (a Soviet Union dance troupe), the National Folk Troupe (al-Firqat-al-Qawmiyyat) of Egypt was erected, in Moiseyev's image with a slight Egyptian twist (Saleh, 1979; Fahmy, 1987). The dance Bambotiya, founded at the Port Said Ismailia Suez, an imitation of the Russian peasant dance lozhki (ложки), was often performed with 3 spoons- the only variation being that the Russians danced with wooden spoons while the Egyptians danced with metal spoons. Bambotiya was later staged by the National Folk Dance Troupe, setting aside 30+ existing folk dances of Egypt that were never recognized for they were never sanitized to be featured on a National stage.

The field of neuroanthropology would argue that certain projections in the brain develop through cultural leveraging wherein cultural practices

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and institutions that are put in place, influence genetic expression, neural pathway development, behavioral patterns, and social interactions (Lende, 2012). Thus a human brain that is concerned with social interactions, has neural circuits rooted in the success of social plasticity that was adopted as an adaptive mechanism (Adolphs, 2001; Bateson & Gluckman, 2012). The cultural niche model thematizes the inheritance of a generation's adapted environment by the next generation (Tooby & DeVore, 1987): socially transmitted adaptations strategized for a particular generation's survival are assimilated and absorbed over the course of history by subsequent generations (Boyd, Richerson, & Henrich, 2011). This indicates a degree of generational inheritance of behaviors, perceptibility, identity constructs, thus influencing their social interactions, attachment styles, orientations, and gender expressions.

Dance within the Arab world, as a result of colonization, is considered the lowest form of art, falling in line with drumming, hand-clapping and mime. While Reda's troupe staged women dancers like Farida Fahmy, beyond the protection of the national stage women's presence in public dances were sparse. To be a belly dancer, one needs a dance license from the government which limits one's presence to certain nightclubs and even dictates a dress code that women should adhere to- shorts underneath belly dance skirts. These invented traditions exist solely on a platform, beyond which, dance within the Arab world is dominated by men.

Impact of Orientalism

Adaptations within a post-colonial culture get featured in art, music, poetry, language, dance and every creative endeavour the culture sets its course upon. For example, belly dance coin belts were never featured in traditional folk dances of the MENA region and are a complete oriental fantasy. They were first painted by an Austrian orientalist, Hanz Zatzka in his artwork entitled, "Dancing Tambourine Girl" in 1859, which was soon incorporated into the oriental fantasy of Salome, the Jewish princess, by the French artist, Francis Luis Mora in 1899. The first induction of the coin belt into a dance outfit was styled by the Russians in 1910 for their Ballet Russe productions. However today, the colonial interpretation outlived the traditional garb of the folk dancers, thus stylizing belly dance in the image of its oriental fantasy.

To paraphrase from T M Krishna's book, "A Southern Music: Karnatik Story". Art is shaped by its connection to our land, language and people.

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Should any of these parameters get displaced, it results in a work of art that is both remarkable and unsettling, marked by its distinct shift in texture. This displacement opens a pathway for deep exploration unto itself, prompting a critical inquiry into whether the essence of the original art form can still be found or has it undergone a transformation that redefines its existence for eternity (Krishna, T. M., 2013).

With the rise of reactionary nationalism within the MENA region, a metaphorical citadel emerged within colonized societies, founded upon a distorted perception of tradition, culture, and artistic expression. It functioned as an arbiter of propriety, sifting through cultural practices to separate what it deemed as the "grain"—respectful cultural representation—from the "chaff".

European colonization of India too encouraged the development of toxic masculinity traits that were already present within the Brahmanical society. Here, the ethnic cleansing of Sadir and its dancers was essential to establish a sanitized art form: Bharatanatyam. Thus, paving the way for the dance to develop alongside religious doctrines, and to be purified from the "sins of the past". Sadir dancers were colloquially termed as "devadasis", and were categorized by the British as sex workers. Today, Sadir doesn't exist in the public sphere. In its place, a highly Sanskritised, structured, religiously rooted dance form- Bharatanatyam, erects itself on the world stage as a representation of Indian culture.

These incidents underscore a recurring pattern: that which is deemed as the cultural "chaff" of the colonized, often encompassing the knowledge and art of marginalized groups, these are culturally sanitized from a European lens, leaving them vulnerable to cycles of dehumanization, exploitation, and even ethnic erasure.

Addressing the Eurocentric Lens

The term "belly dance" has no equivalent in any African language or Arabic. It is a borrowed terminology that entered the English lexicon in 1883, derived from the French term *danse du ventre* (literally, "dance of the belly"), coined in 1864 as a nickname for the artwork La danse de l'almée ("The Dance of the Almeh") by Jean-Léon Gérôme. As the word, "belly dance" isn't of African origin but is an orientalist's classification of all the dance forms within the MENA region, there doesn't exist a single African source that could provide a definition for belly dance, devoid of European influences. What we do have is a thorough download of the many folk dances

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that were colloquially termed as belly dance, that now face extinction due to the growing popularity of Westernized belly dance.

In Egypt alone, there are over 30 distinct folk dances, all of which were colloquially and reductively grouped under the label "belly dance." A few notable mentions of the dance forms include Hajala (from the Marsa Matrouh region); Melaya Leff (Alexandria); Henna, Semsemiya & Bambotiya (Port Said Ismailia Sues); Dahia, Mashreqiya & Debka (Sinai Peninsula); Fallahi, Ghawazee & Gypsy (Delta Region); Baladi, Awalem & Oriental (Cairo); Saidi, Jawazee, Gypsy & Tahtieb game (Upper Egypt); Bedouin, Kaffafa, Zagala & Burmia Baharia (Western Desert); Bedouin and Kaffafa (Eastern Desert); 14 different types of Nubian dances by the Mewari/Meroe Kingdom (Nubia); Whiplash & Hosit (Halayeb & Shalatein, respectively).

The definitions of "belly dance" themselves reflect an orientalist lens, shaped by the limited perceptions of Western observers. In a pamphlet circulated between 1850–1912 in France, entitled "African Negro", the danse du ventre was defined as, "they move the abdomen by jerks and recall (though in a more decent way), one of the aspects of danse du ventre." Other Eurocentric interpretations of the dance include, "a dance originating in the Middle East, typically performed by a woman and involving undulating movements of the belly and rapid gyration of the hips"; "the activity of performing a type of dance originally from Western Asia in which a woman moves her hips and stomach"; "a solo dance of Middle Eastern origin, performed by a woman with midriff exposed, emphasizing movements of the pelvis and abdominal muscles"; and "a sensuous and provocative dance of Middle Eastern origin, performed by women, with undulating movements of the hips and abdomen."

Common across these definitions is the gendered assumption of women as the primary performers, a narrow geographical attribution to the Middle East, and a fixation on the hips and abdomen as the central focus of the dance. These portrayals disregard the evolutionary breadth of its movements, the involvement of other body parts in its choreography, and the cultural nuances that shaped its practice, such as chest undulations observed in dances originating from India, challenge these oversimplified narratives. Contrary to these restrictive depictions, men have historically performed many of these dances, namely, Alexandrian dance, Henna dance, Om Al Kholoo, Bambotiya, Semsemiya, Debka and Tehtieb. The Egyptian Heritage Folklore Troupe, El-Tannoura (locally known as firqah ghureiyyah) is a well-known all-male ensemble active in Cairo (Shay, 2002).

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"An adult male, not a youth whom he saw twice, once in a wedding procession and, later, performing in the Hotel d'Orient in Cairo . . . Flaubert found Hasan's performance possessed high artistry" (Fraser, 2014).

Oriental Discourses in Post-Colonial Egypt

Consider the case of Ghawazee dancers, a nomadic tribal dance group that could be found in the Delta region of Egypt in the early 1800s, up until their craft was sexualized and censored.

King Muhammad Ali Pasha, in his obsession to modernize Egypt, charged Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, an Al-Azhar student and imam of the first group, to study European modesty. Encapsulated in his book, "An Imam in Paris", al-Tahtawi writes,

> Everyone in France loves dancing, which is considered something distinguished and elegant, instead of morally depraved. By the same token, it never departs from the rules of decency, whereas in Egypt the dance is one of the specialities of women since it arouses desires. Conversely, in Paris, it is a special kind of jump, which is entirely devoid of even the slightest whiff of debauchery. (Ṭahṭāwī, R. R., 1801–1873).

In 1834, King Muhammad Ali Pasha banned all women performers, specifically the Ghawazee dancers from performing in Cairo, compelling them to retreat to Upper Egypt, particularly to Aswan and other rural enclaves that lay far beyond. Seeking to project a modern and contemporary front to his European counterparts, the King castrated a traditional art form, deeming it overtly sexual, thus erasing its existence from public urban life.

Traditionally, the nomadic group of Ghawazee dancers (who can be traced back to the Nawari tribe from India), adorned an entari, an ankle length robe with a chest cut-out. Their kinetic movements emphasized hip and chest undulations and shimmies, a set of movements considered "uncouth, uncivilized and uncultured" by the European travellers. The state's patriarchal attempt to control women's bodies and limit their presence in public spaces, and women's dominance over performance and dancing, led to men having wider freedoms to penetrate dancing and performance spaces and filled the gap left by women's exclusion. This led to the emergence of Khawalt dancers, who from a European lens, were viewed as men cross-dressing as women. Today, the word "khawal" exists as a derogatory term for gay men in Egypt.

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"To replace the ghawazee with the khawals, fengi, kogek, or batchas would be representing a masculinized West that penetrates a male Orient—nothing less than an act of sodomy" (Shay, 2009). If ghawazee dancers evoked prominent desires from the 'delicate' Western viewers, any encounter with the khawals may have forced the Western traveller to face his anxiety-driven homosexual latent desires- that from a European standard, would have been considered uncivilized. Gérard de Nerval (1808—1855) at a Café in Cairo once documented:

> The dancing girls appeared in a cloud of dust and tobacco smoke. As their heels beat upon the ground, with a tinkle of little bells and anklets, their raised arms quivered in harmony, their hips shook with a voluptuous movement; their form seemed bare under the muslin between the little jacket and the low loose girdle. . . . They twirled about so quickly that it was hard to distinguish the features of these seductive creatures, whose fingers shook little cymbals, as large as castanets, as they gestured boldly to the . . . strains of flute and tambourine. Two of them seemed particularly beautiful; they held themselves proudly; their Arab eyes were brightened by kohl, their full yet delicate cheeks were lightly painted. But the third I must admit betrayed the less gentle sex by a week old beard, and when I looked into the matter carefully . . . it did not take me long to discover, that the dancing girls were, in point of fact, all males (Gruber and Strohmeyer, 2022).

Western phobias were imbibed as familiar attitudes by writers, traditionally of the region. Metin And (1976), a Turkish researcher wrote of Anatolian male dancer's contributions:

> Their manner and dress were suited to their unnatural profession; being partly male, and partly female, they were so loved and lauded by their audiences that many poets sang their praises in verse. They praised their physical beauty as well as their skill in their art. One of the most notable poets was the famous poet, Enderunly Fazil. His Defter-i A$k (meaning "Book of Love") contains 170 couplets praising the beauty and skill of the celebrated eighteenth century dancing boy, jlingene Ismail. His tyngi- name, a book about the famous dancing boys of the early nineteenth century, gives the names and stage names of forty-five performers (And, 1976).

The bitter edged sword of colonialism impacts the Arab world till date, with Eduardian constructs of gender and sexuality still accepted as the norm.

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With Oriental tours available to the Westerners, their disdain toward the sexually independent nature of women did not go unnoticed. Disgust, accompanied by degeneracy, lustfulness and corruption were often reflected in their writings.

The pursuit of modernity walks hand in hand with the imposition of modesty: to be modern is to embrace modesty. The notion of modesty, particularly in relation to clothing and nudity regulations, emerged prominently in the 1800s. Before this period, modesty was primarily understood as a descriptor of one's temperament. In contrast to the Oriental life, European societies adhered to the doctrine of coverture—a legal principle asserting that a woman's identity was never her own. Instead, it was considered an extension of her father's identity, which was transferred to her husband upon marriage. A *feme covert*, was a married woman, legally dead, as her rights are subsumed by that of her husband's (Schiebinger, L. L., 1993).

High in the Atlas mountains, an encounter with the Amazigh tribe of Ouled Nail women, who often left their mountainous abode to travel to cities, in search of money by participating in the Nailiyat dance profession, were deemed to the status of a sex worker by the French troops around the 1830s. The French further estimated that the women's desire to indulge in dance must be to earn dowry. There is no documentation of this tribe to exchange dowry during matrimony. Further, it was never akin to a rite of passage that had to be endured by the woman, but more seen as a profession or a trade that the tribe had encouraged for women, so they could be independent.

In Flute of Sand, one of the tribe's men is recorded to have said, "Our wives, knowing what love is, and having wealth of their own, will marry only the man they love. And, unlike the wives of other men, will remain faithful to death. Thanks be to Allah." (Morgan, 1956). Some dancers never left the profession and would often purchase a cafe or continue as a teacher to younger generations of dancers.

The financially stable and socially independent lives of dancers in Egypt not only defied the standards of propriety upheld in Europe but also threatened the foundations of a hyper-masculine society that Europeans were accustomed to. These women lived lives where men were not in charge of their choices, nor did they belong to any one man—a stark contrast to the patriarchal structure that demanded female dependence and submission. This autonomy posed a direct challenge to the existence of a male-dominated so-

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cial order, destabilizing the very principles that upheld European patriarchy. Antoine Clot (1840) described Oriental dancing as:

> There is no resemblance between the Orient's dancing and that of Europe; in Europe dancing is generally a form of entertainment between the two sexes, but in the Orient, women never dance with men . . . The nature of their [Eastern dancers] dancing is very licentious that neither will I venture to describe the details nor talk about it in general terms (Clot, 1840).

The perception of life within the SWANA region, is often based on orientalist writings and depictions of the culture. The cultural myth of the existence of veiled women, Harem culture and the sexualized nature of belly dance is an oriental fantasy that is predominant even in the 21st century.

"The oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction be-tween one man and another man," remarked Gustav Flaubert in 1853.

Depictions of oriental life, specifically postcards consisting of nude women from SWANA regions (posed with everyday objects, often without their informed consent) was the marketing drive behind oriental exploration quests. Whether consent was provided is unclear. One of the famous photo prints were of Lev and Fils, which they had titled as "Moorish" meaning "of the black skin/black hair".

Fairs and exhibits in the United States, such as those organized at the Midway Plaisance in 1893, were designed to highlight "primitive cultures in contrast with civilization as presented in the White City." Among these displays was also Little Egypt, featuring Fareda Mahzar, in the "Hootchie Kootchie" exhibit at Coney Island (Sellers-Young, B., & Shay, A., 2016). These exhibits not only exploited dancers and art forms but also commodified the rich knowledge bases of indigenous cultures, showcasing them as mere trophies of colonial conquests (Sellers-Young, B., 2016).

A theme existent among all European depiction of belly dance, was the sexualized, eroticized femme. Published within the Encyclopaedia Sexualis, Victor Robinson, MD, reports that belly dance is a sex dance, performed by the bride to consummate the marriage. Excerpts from the book read:

> The dance of the Bride elect: . . . walk with hip swings as though to a huge sacred phallus . . . Ah!! Ah!! What glorious sexual union has come to me. Ah (ejaculation) . . . my throat swollen . . . I long for the Sacred Phallus again -strong, erect, glorious.

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Conclusion

The historical and cultural analysis developed in this paper depicts how Orientalism isn't just a legacy that has permeated the Western concept of the East, but is also responsible for the gender and sexual constructs imposed upon colonized societies (Schiebinger, L. L., 1993; Russett, C., 1991). While Orientalists described the Eastern cultures as decadent, sexually free, and feminized, they sharply contrasted them with the rational and virtuous West. Russet had once laid the foundational thought, "Of all the permutations of physical differentiation sex is, together with color, the most evident". Darwinian sciences paved the way for the European obsession with "(white) man's place in nature (Russett, C., 1991)". The advancement in scientific theory not only legitimized the position of men but also established physiological differences in races as the basis to construct a social structure for subjugation.

Alexander Pope had once penned, "the proper study of mankind is man". Thus reiterating the school of thought that positioned the white man as the epitome of Godliness, while women and people of color exist as a fall from Grace. Darwin had also once remarked, ". . . it is in the struggle for existence and (especially) for the possession of women that men acquire their vigor and courage." In Sexual Science, Russet noted, "in the evolutionary development of the race women lagged behind men, much as *primitive people* lagged behind Europeans." This infantalization of women, their capabilities and social power, justified men's argument for "adult supervision" necessary in femme dominated spaces. Thomas Bendyshe, in response to Hunt's paper, "On Negro's Place in Nature", remarked, "(Women were) in some respects inferior to man as Negroes are to Europeans". The birth of sexual science as a differentiator between social constructs of man and woman, led to the Eurocentric ideologies of black emancipation.

These pseudoscientific projects gave birth to Phrenology, and subsequently Anthropometry, where measurement of skulls and body morphology was introduced as a race differentiator, thus providing White dominance with the necessary "logic". The Europeans then spent several years finding reliable axes for differentiation between races. From facial angle to the prognathous jaw, cephalic index developed by Broca to brain volume and intelligence to size of pelvis, none seemed to exist without exceptions to the rule. These dented efforts in differentiation on the bases of sex and race, yield the construction of hypermasculinity as the desirable trait for colonized African men to aspire for.

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This dichotomy laid the ground for the objectification and commodification of both bodies and cultures. The deconstruction of sex and gender reveals how colonialism turned cultural expressions, particularly art and dance, into tools to reinforce European dominance while dehumanizing and silencing Indigenous voices. Re-choreographing or sanitising art forms to cater to the Eurocentric notions of proprietary still exists in post-colonial societies. In Egypt alone, one requires a special license to be able to dance: women's movements are still restricted in public spaces and the state employs moral policing to maintain modesty laws.

The erasure and appropriation, as cultural examples of sexualization of traditional dances, for example, belly dance, are reflective of the continued struggle to reclaim and redefine the meaning of culture. The colonial project's focus on the feminization and sexualization of colonized bodies, especially women, disrupted traditional practices and brought forth lasting imprints of trauma that continue to reverberate through generations. As the neuroanthropological perspective shows, these cultural imprints are perpetuated not only through societal structures but also through genetic and neurological adaptations that continue in cycles of oppression and resistance.

The afterlife of Orientalism and its effects on gender/sexual identities require an ongoing critical re-evaluation of cultural practices, a decolonial effort, and the manner in which postcolonial societies negotiate and resist the residual effect of colonialist ideologies. These historical dynamics, better understood, underpin contemporary cultural expressions, which, though shaped by colonial histories, remain sites of resistance, reclamation, and transformation.

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Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to sincerely thank my spouse in his efforts to proofread this paper. Great appreciation to my mentors and friends for the opportune comments and helpful critiques that immensely helped me during the research. I want to express my gratitude to libraries and archives that made essential materials accessible. Lastly, I am deeply grateful to my family and friends for their unwavering encour-

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agement and patience throughout this journey. This work would not have been possible without their belief in me.

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